

School of ROCK

As Homer Simpson once said: 'Rock stars... is there anything they don't know?' And now they could have management lessons for HR

BY TIM SMEDLEY

Peter Cook has 25 years' experience of business and is an MBA tutor for the Open University Business School. But he also performs and records in rock bands. For years he's been combining his two lives by getting business people to pick up a guitar, let their hair down and rock. In the process, they learn important lessons in teamwork and leadership. Now he's turned his ideas into a book: *Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll*. PM quizzes him about rocking the business world...

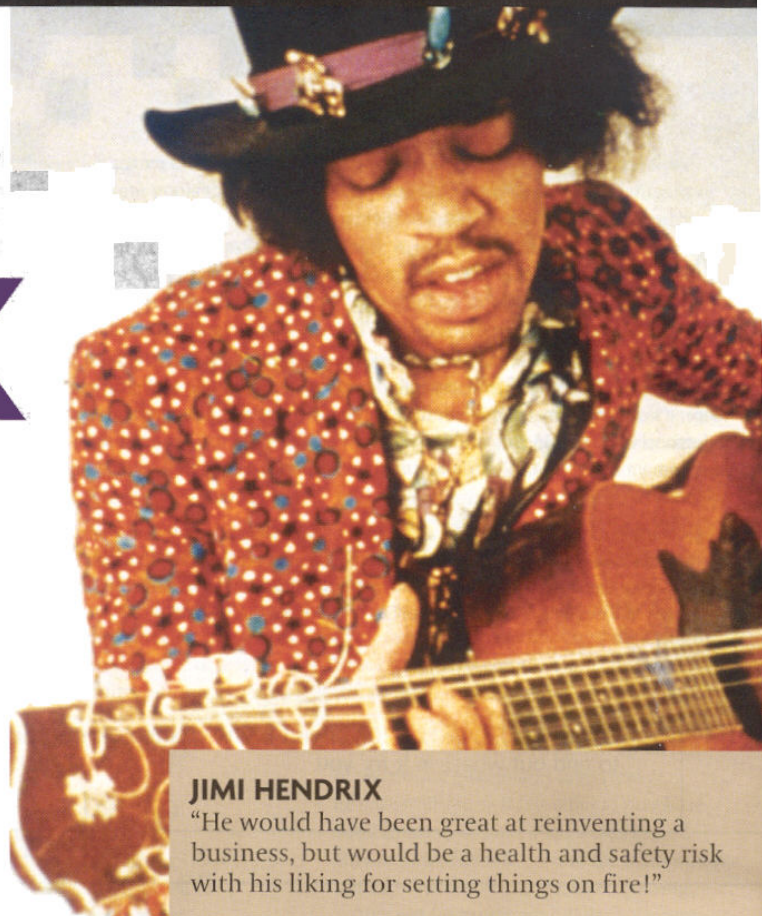
Where did you get the idea for the book?
I had a misspent youth writing and

performing music with cult punk acts, which included John Otway, Dr Feelgood, Sploognessabounds and Altered Images.

I also used to work in the pharmaceutical industry, leading teams of innovative scientists – whom we used to call misfits or mavericks, but now refer to as “diverse talents”. I found that you

could get the best out of them by showing your authentic self out of work. Once in a while, I would reverse the idea of being the boss, cook the team a meal and play party games – which came to include musical jamming sessions.

In business, I think some organisations are wound far too tight, and others are completely on the sofa. I don't think either



JIMI HENDRIX

“He would have been great at reinventing a business, but would be a health and safety risk with his liking for setting things on fire!”

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MADONNA

“Understands the commercial end of the rock business and uses it to her advantage. She runs the record company rather than the other way round. She'd make a brilliant HR person, although some would be offended by her direct coaching style.”



ROBBIE WILLIAMS

“He could work in sales, HR, pretty well anywhere. Can you imagine receiving your appraisal from this emotionally literate guy?”

GEORGE MICHAEL AND PINK

“I love them for their authenticity. They've made a brand out of 'I don't care'. I would not put them in charge of a budget if they ran a business though.”



approach is very useful. Bringing back some of the informality into very formal settings is one of the important points in the book.

It sounds like you're a cross between Jack Black in *School of Rock* and David Brent in *The Office*?

No way. They came about 10 years after I started doing this! A few years back I'd never seen *The Office* when a neighbour brought round the episode where David Brent's playing the guitar. He said: "Look at this - it's you!"

When I went to see *School of Rock* with my kids and Jack Black taught his students how to play in a band, I did recognise some of the ways that I get people to do things. You know - a group may be sitting there as civil servants for the first 10 minutes, and 20 minutes later they're on stage with wigs and they're reliving their childhood dreams.

You argue that MBAs are great, but they fail to teach people the necessary attitude for business, is that right?

Essentially, yes. Most MBAs teach knowledge. This is absolutely essential but it's insufficient to get ahead in 21st century companies. The ability to form instant relationships with people, to get them excited about a project and to turn an idea into reality are equally as important. These skills are difficult to teach traditionally but can be learnt. I guess we are talking emotional literacy and we need experience-based learning to acquire this rather than

PowerPoint slides. But I'm not criticising MBAs - I do teach them after all.

Let's take your book's title apart. First "sex" - surely you're not advocating office flings?

No, sex is used as an analogy for relationships. Good leaders are above all else great relationship makers - it is as true as it ever was that all success at work boils down to good human relationships. It's about building trust, rather than one-night stands. *Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll* explores relationship management and emotional literacy in the context of making and keeping relationships.

"Drugs" are not typically associated with best business practice. Are you saying leaders should "get high" on leadership?

In a sense, yes. A natural high comes out of loving what you do and getting the adrenaline and endorphins going every morning. But I'm not saying be a workaholic - that, of course, is an addiction.

... and "rock 'n' roll"?

Some musical forms require greater levels of discipline, such as classical, while others need more improvisation. Freeform jazz may be okay for a two-person start-up business, but sooner or later there is a need to add structure if the business is to grow. Conversely, many government bureaucracies are wound much too tight and find it hard to encourage innovation.

Rock music is both structured and improvised, simultaneously tight and loose. It is a good model for today's business,

which must be nimble and able to deliver the goods when it counts. I like the rock stars with longevity, who can re-invent themselves (see picture captions).

What's next for you?

Much of my work is serious (but not dull) in that I get involved in company strategy development. But I'm working on a TV programme on leadership and rock 'n' roll and we're planning a special conference at Liverpool's Cavern club (of Beatles fame) for the 2008 European capital of culture. ■

Further info

Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll - Leadership Lessons from the Academy of Rock, by Peter Cook is published by Crown House.

THE BEATLES

"They crucially understood the need to get the job done in three minutes. In a fast work world, this is a core skill set."



PRINCE

"He brings substance and style together in ways that others cannot get close to achieving - a valuable lesson in branding and talent management. He is also a great champion of diversity, having run a meritocracy in his collaborations with other artists. However, I think he'd blow all the budgets on flowers and purple sofas in the reception area if he ran a business."

